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SUBJECT Commentary: Intelligence Committees

DON HARRISON: Personnel changes in the Reagan Administration and even some large corporations often make news headlines.

But, in his commentary tonight, David Wise tells us some important changes in leadership of Congress have received less notice.

DAVID WISE: Some of the more interesting stories in Washington don't make the headlines. That's because an important change in political power may take place without any dramatics.

Just that kind of change has taken place in the struggle for control between Congress and the secret intelligence agencies.

The CIA and almost a dozen other agencies make up the intelligence structure of the United States Government. Because they mostly operate in secrecy, the agencies are watched by only two committees in the Congress, one in the Senate and one in the House.

In both congressional panels, conservative or moderate chairmen have been replaced by more liberal lawmakers. In the Senate, Barry Goldwater has been succeeded by Minnesota Republican David Durenberger, a strong advocate of congressional control over the spy agencies. In the House, Lee Hamilton, a Democrat from Columbus, has replaced Edward Boland of Massachusetts.

Hamilton, a widely respected moderate, is also expected to be tough on the intelligence agencies. And it's not only the chairmen who are changing. The fifteen-member Senate committee has nine new members. The vice chairman, Patrick Leahy of Vermont, is not a man easily persuaded to go along with CIA covert operations. He brings yankee skepticism to the job.

In the House, the old guard is changed as well with several new members joining the intelligence panel.

All of these changes in people will mean changes in policy on such key issues as U.S. covert action in Central America, how to deal with international terrorism, and the role of the CIA in Afghanistan where the agency supports a major covert operation against the Soviet Union.

So, it's a big story but a quiet one with a lot at stake for the CIA, the Congress and the public.

This is David Wise, for CNN, in Washington.